

[Foreword](#)
[Introduction](#)
[The Order of Creation: Part I](#)
[The Order of Creation: Part II](#)
[The Order of the Fall](#)
[The Order of Redemption](#)
[Conclusion](#)
[Notes](#)

Foreword Joseph Coleson's ['Ezer Cenegdo: A Power Like Him, Facing Him as Equal](#) is published in conjunction with the second Wesleyan/Holiness Women Clergy Conference (Indianapolis, April 11-14, 1996). The booklet furthers the mission of the Conference which is "to equip and encourage divinely-called women in vocational ministry and professional leadership positions."

Professor Coleson incorporates recent scholarship which corroborates biblical insights which support the equality of the sexes, insights shared with other Wesleyan/Holiness writers dating to the earliest years of the Wesleyan/Holiness movement. Fannie McDowell Hunter and B. T. Roberts were among those who contended that God created women and men equals and gave them joint dominion over the rest of creation. Female subjection was a result of the Fall. The Order of Redemption restores the equality which was present at creation. For specific references, see [Wesleyan/Holiness Women Clergy: A Preliminary Bibliography](#) which was published in conjunction with the first Wesleyan/Holiness Women Clergy Conference (Glorieta, NM, April 14-17, 1994).

For copies of this booklet or the bibliography please complete the [order form](#)

Rev. Dr. Susie C. Stanley

> [contents](#)

> [top of page](#)

"Ezer Cenegdo: A Power Like Him, Facing Him as Equal"

Introduction The major purpose of this short study is to show that in Genesis 1 and 2 God's design of the human race included equality between the genders. (This equality was to serve as the model for equality in every other human realm, as well.) Genesis 1-2 is the first and most important text for this issue because this is the only description we have of God's intentions for what we may call "The Order of Creation." The central teaching both of Genesis 1:26-31 and Genesis 2:18-25 is that both male and female are human, that male and female are equal, and that both male and female are equally created in God's image.

How did affairs degenerate from God's perfect intention? Genesis 3 teaches that male dominance over females (or more rarely in human cultures, formalized structures of female dominance over males) is a result of sin, "The Order of the Fall." Genesis 3 will be our next focus.

God did not leave the human race hopelessly trapped in the Order of the Fall. God put into motion a plan to redeem the race and restore us to a condition like (perhaps even better than) that enjoyed by the first humans before the Fall; this renewed life we may call "The Order of Redemption." A final section of this work will deal briefly with the Order of Redemption and the hope it engenders of restoring God's intended order to all our redeemed relationships, beginning in this life.

Genesis 1-3 raises many other important and interesting issues, as well. Still other issues have been raised by readers who think Genesis 1-3 addresses them, when in fact it does not. Whatever these other issues, whether addressed in Genesis 1-3 or not, this work does not take a stand on any of them. Our focus in these pages is only the issue of gender equality.¹

> [contents](#)

> [top of page](#)

The Order of Creation: Part I

As presented in Genesis 1, God's creation of the human race was the climax of the whole creative process on this earth. God had prepared the inanimate world to receive and sustain life, then had created a complex web of life. Beginning with verse 26, this final creative act is depicted, spare in its detail, but rich in its imagery and in important revelation.

[Genesis 1:26: In the Image of God](#)²

Then God said, "Let us make '*adam*' in our image, according to our likeness, and let them exercise dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the flying creatures of the sky, and over the land creatures, even over all the earth, including every moving thing that moves upon the earth."

A new creature was to be formed, different in several ways from life already on the earth. To emphasize the importance of this new creature, the text tells us that God held a council before creating it. For no other object or creature does Genesis 1 record a planning session.

All God's previous words had been commands for something to come into existence, or to begin fulfilling a designated function. Now God said, "Let us make." This is not a command, but a proposal. It is also a statement about community. Genesis 1:26 says that God exists somehow in community. This was true before the creation of any intelligent beings; it would be true had God created none of them.

This new creature was '*adam*'; Hebrew '*adam*' is a collective noun. When both the man and the woman are in view, both are included in this noun. When a single creature is the subject, as in chapter two before the making of the woman, the '*adam*' is not the man without reference to the woman. Rather, '*adam*' is the single human being, as yet undifferentiated according to gender. Only after sin entered the world did the man arrogate to himself the name '*adam*', and relegate the woman to not-quite-human status in the hierarchy he fashioned, a hierarchy that has been followed in most human cultures since. The author of Genesis, however, rejected this male claim. (See, e.g., Genesis 5:2; 6:1-8.)

As '*adam*', we are made in the "image" and "likeness" of God. This does not mean God has a physical body. "Image" may best be understood as "reflection" or "representation." "Likeness" is essentially a synonym of "image," as used here. Hebrew authors often used two (or more) words to express the richness and fullness of important concepts.

What this means here follows from the rest of the verse; God stated His intention to give 'adam' dominion over the earthly creation. 'Adam' was created in God's image in our capacity to exercise responsible and benevolent stewardship dominion over this earth and its non-human inhabitants.

This implies intelligence, wisdom, language, personality, will, spirit, creativity, ability to feel, humor, and more. It also implies community. In all these, human beings were created in the image of God. In spite of the Fall, our humanity is characterized and defined by these traits. The image of God in us makes us worth redeeming.

Genesis 1:27: Male and Female

So God created the '*adam*' in His image; in the image of God He created it; male and female He created them.

Genesis 1:27 is the climax of the creation account of chapter 1. Its language is poetic, its teaching profound, its impact powerful. It consists in three statements, each with God as Subject, each with '*adam*' as object, and each with '*bara*' (created) as the verb. This can be shown as follows:

Then God created the '*adam*' in His image;

In the image of God He created it;

Male and female He created them.

The Hebrew verb '*bara*' (created) is used sparingly in the Bible, even in the creation account of Genesis 1. Except for this verse, it is used only in verse 1, an introduction, and in verse 21, relating the creation of the first animate life.

How amazing, then, that '*bara*' should be used three times in this one verse! This is truly a special act of God, and the author wants the reader not just to know it intellectually, but to feel it, ponder it, use it as a guiding principle for action. A human being is a special creation of God.

The first two lines of this verse repeat the same statement in slightly different words. This is a device of poetry, but it is also for emphasis. God wants every human being to know that s/he is created in God's image. There is no such thing as a worthless human being, for existence in God's image makes every human's worth beyond calculation. There are not resources enough on the earth to equal the worth of a single human, because each is created in the image of God.

C. S. Lewis expressed this truth as follows:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. . . . You have never talked to a mere mortal. . . . Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses.³

Genesis 1:27 states very clearly that women and men are created equally in the image of God. After the strong statements of our creation in God's image in the first two lines, the only change in the third line is that humankind is both male and female. Females are in God's image. Males are in God's image. Neither is more nor less in God's image than the other.

We should notice one more way this verse emphasizes the truth it is setting forth. In both the second and third lines the first element in the line is not in its normal position; it is at the beginning of the sentence for emphasis. "In the image of God" normally would be last in the sentence; in this one, it is first for emphasis. In the image of God the '*adam*' is created.

Similarly, "male and female" normally would be last in the sentence, but here are first for emphasis. Both male and female the '*adam*' was created. Both female and male are '*adam*'. Both male and female are created by God. Both female and male are in the image of God.

In only twelve short words (Hebrew) this climactic verse presents and emphasizes in many ways three foundational truths:

- 1.) Every human being is a special creation of God.
- 2.) Every human being is in the image of God.
- 3.) Male and female are '*adam*', created in the image of God.

Genesis 1:28: The Original Blessing of the 'Adam

And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it, and exercise dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the flying creatures of the sky, and over every living being that moves upon the earth."

The author presents the commissioning of the human pair as a blessing. God's blessing is not merely the bestowing of material goods or provisions. Here is a much higher blessing, the delegation of oversight and responsibility.

This commissioning refers to the '*adam*' as "them," plural, not singular. Human dominion over this earth is a co-regency. Both the female and the male, jointly, are responsible to care for God's creation. The female is not a part of the creation over which the male has dominion. In the economy God intended, planned, and executed, the '*adam*', female and male, received the commission together. For one half of humanity to subjugate the other half robs both of God's intended blessing upon all humans.

In case we missed the pronoun, "them," the five imperative verbs that are the substance of this blessing/commission are all plural. "You (two)," the female and the male, and ultimately all the human race, are included.

> [contents](#)

> [top of page](#)

The Order of Creation: Part II

Genesis 2 picks up the narrative of human creation, and supplies much more detail than could be presented in Genesis 1, given the different aims of the two chapters.

Genesis 2:7: God-Formed, God-Breathed

Then Yahweh-Elohim (God) formed the '*adam*' of clay from the earth, and breathed into its nostrils the breath of life, and the '*adam*' became a living creature.

Throughout Genesis 1 and 2 the author emphasizes that God's creation of the human race was a special and climactic act. This verse does that in two ways.

The first is the use of the verb "formed." We should notice this verb at once because here is its first use in the narrative; "made" and "created" have been used up to this point. The Hebrew verb *yatsar*, "he formed," is used most often with reference to the work of the potter. The potter forms on the wheel the vessel that s/he makes. The noun translated "potter" is from this verb, as well; it could be translated "former/the one who forms."

This is a tremendous revelation. Human beings were not formed from the blood of a guilty, executed, minor god, for the purpose of serving the gods, as the most important ancient extra-biblical creation account would have it. Human beings are not an accidental link in a long chain of random events without purpose, as the most important modern extra-biblical account of origins would have it. The sovereign God formed the '*adam*' as the intended end of His creative acts on this earth. We know God does not have physical hands as we do. But the use of the verb "formed" invites us to think of God as skillfully and lovingly forming the first human from the dust of the earth, just as the master potter forms the finest ceramic vessel on the wheel.

The second way this verse emphasizes the special nature of the creation of humankind is by the statement that God "breathed into its nostrils the breath of life." Again, we know that God does not depend upon the oxygen in the earth's atmosphere to sustain God's life. But again, we are invited to think anthropomorphically. The transcendent God whose spoken word brought the universe into existence came intimately upon this earth, in some way, to form and animate the first human. The human race is not divine, but our life began with the divine breath.

A Hebrew play on words in this verse makes clear our connection with the ground. The word translated "ground" here is 'adamah. So we are told that Yahweh-Elohim formed the 'adam from the clay of the 'adamah. We are physical, material beings.

At the same time, we are spiritual, because our life began only when God breathed into the nostrils of the first *'adam*. Not until then did that one become a living being, which the other animals already were, though not by means of the divine breath. The divine breath and the divine image make human beings, not divine, but of the spiritual world.

Genesis 2:18a: "It Is Not Good"

Then Yahweh-Elohim said, "It is not good for the *'adam* to be alone."

In the narrative of the creation of the heavens and the earth in chapter 1, the creation of the *'adam*—the human pair—is climactic. In the much more detailed account of the creation of the *'adam* in chapter 2, the differentiation of the *'adam* into male and female is climactic.

Six times in the account of chapter 1, when God looked upon what He had made, "God saw that it was good." The seventh time, after the creation of the *'adam*, "it was very good." Yet here God's evaluation is, "It is not good." This is an important indicator that Genesis 2:4b-25 is a purposeful return to the creation of the *'adam*, giving the reader important information which would have sidetracked the account of the creation week had it been included there.

Was God caught off guard? Did God just discover, after the *'adam* had been wandering around for awhile, that it was "not good for the *'adam* to be alone"? Did God have to modify the original plan to come up with something better? Why did not God create two humans at once in the first place?

The answers to these questions become clear as the author takes the reader through God's process of differentiating the *'adam* into male and female. God was not caught off guard. God did it this way so human beings would understand that human companionship, especially between man and woman, is a priceless gift from God. God knew that perpetual solitude is not good for spiritual beings; this way, the *'adam* discovered it, too. We really do need each other.

Genesis 2:18b: Another Autonomous Power/Being - an Other

"I will make for it an *'ezer cenegdo*."

English versions consistently translate *'ezer* as "helper." This is possible, but if we translate it this way, we must avoid the English connotation of someone of inferior status or skill. For example, "carpenter's helper" and "mason's helper" refer to those who do not yet have the skills to be master carpenters or masons. In the Hebrew Scriptures, "helper" means just the opposite. When the Bible speaks of a helper, it usually refers to God the Helper, the Rescuer of those who cannot help themselves. If *'ezer* should be translated "helper" here, it means God intended to make someone who would rescue the 'adam from solitude. This would be God's final step in making a creature in God's own image, which includes living intimately in community.

But *'ezer* almost certainly does not mean "helper" here. There is another Hebrew word with these same root letters; this noun would be spelled the same whichever root it came from. The two words originated before Hebrew was reduced to writing, when it had two different letters, both now represented by the single Hebrew letter *'ayin*. These two different original letters are not imaginary. Ancient Ugaritic had both; modern Arabic has both. The existence of the "missing" letter in an earlier Hebrew is why, for example, we still spell Gaza and Gomorrah with "G."

The second root *'zr* went unrecognized in Hebrew until scholars noticed that *'ezer* often parallels words for "strength," "power." The easiest way to see this is in the alternate names of a well-known Judean king. Uzziah means "God is my strength." But Uzziah had another name, Azariah; Azariah also means "God is my strength." In several other places, too, especially in poetic passages, the two nouns in this king's two names appear in contexts where they must be synonyms and where *'ezer*, therefore, must mean "strength" or "power." Thus, in some passages *'ezer*, from one root, means "helper," but in other passages *'ezer*, from the other root, means "strength," or "power."⁴

So which meaning should we choose here? The following Hebrew word *cenegdo* is strong evidence in favor of "strength," "power," "autonomous being." Hebrew *cenegdo* is two prepositions and a pronoun written as one word. The first preposition means "like," "as," "according to." This being (the *'ezer*) would be like the *'adam*, in the sense of being of the same kind or species. This one, too, would be *'adam*. The second preposition means here, "facing," in the sense of standing in one's presence as an equal and other entity. It is the first biblical expression of the "I-Thou" relationship. The relative position of two parties when in each other's presence carried social significance in the ancient Near East, just as in modern societies. Two persons, both standing or both sitting (or both lying), facing each other, by their position and by their body language, acknowledge each other as equals. That is the import of this preposition. We should translate the pronoun, "it," rather than "him," though "it" does strike us as too impersonal. As long as there is only one of the species *'adam*, it is no more accurate to call it "him," than to call it "her." Until the differentiation is done, until gender is introduced into the human species, there is neither he nor she, but only "it." The Hebrew pronoun bears this meaning often in other contexts; when the pronoun refers to the *'adam*, we should translate "it" throughout Genesis 2, until verse 23, when *'ish* (man) and *'ishah* (woman) are introduced.⁵

How should we translate the entire expression? A straightforward literal translation is, "I will make for it a power like [it], facing it." An expansive paraphrase, expressing in English all the Hebrew intends, might read, "To end the loneliness of the single human, I will make another power, another autonomous being, like it, corresponding to it, of the same species, and facing it, standing opposite it in an equal I-Thou relationship, another human, its equal. And when I have finished that last creative step, the human species will be both male and female."

Genesis 2:20: To Name, But Not To Find

So the *'adam* gave names to all the domesticated animals, and to the flying creatures of the sky, and to all the wild creatures of the field, but for the *'adam* it did not find another power, another being, corresponding to it.

We are tempted by our usual English renderings to think, "It wasn't fair that Adam got to name the animals before Eve was even created." But since the naming of the other creatures was done before the differentiation of the *'adam* into two persons, the human doing the naming was not yet either male or female. This is why we have left *'adam* untranslated, and usually preceded it with the definite article, as does the Hebrew.

By the time this task of naming was finished, God's primary purpose was also accomplished. The *'adam* had discovered what God already knew. Among the creatures was no other autonomous power, no being corresponding to it, no other creature its equal. The success of the naming—establishing dominion over the other creatures—is contrasted poignantly with the failure to find a companion among them. The *'adam* must wait for God to act.

Genesis 2:21: From the Side

So Yahweh-Elohim caused a deep sleep to fall upon the *'adam* and it slept. Then God took a section from its side and closed up the flesh instead.

So God acted. We can say nothing about the details of this differentiation. The image probably includes the traditional "rib," but it certainly is intended to suggest more than that, as well. Only here in all the Bible is this word translated "rib," referring to a human being. Elsewhere this word refers to the sides of buildings, of hills, of walls, etc. We should note, too, that the male called the female "flesh of my flesh," as well as "bone of my bones" (v. 23).

Furthermore, the Septuagint (the first translation of the Hebrew Bible, into Greek in the Third Century B.C.) translates this word *pleura*; the Greek term is not limited to designating the ribs. That which God built into a woman was not some small incidental piece of the *'adam*. This was major surgery. Both what God built into woman and what was left to become man were different from the original. There is no hint here of superiority of one gender over the other. The issue here is the differentiation into two genders, different but equal.

Genesis 2:22: God Built a Woman

Then Yahweh-Elohim built the side which He had taken from the *'adam* into a woman, and He brought her to the *'adam*.

The use of "built" here is significant, because "built" is used in the Akkadian creation accounts to describe the making of human beings by the gods. Also, in the Ugaritic epic poems, one title of the father of the

gods is "builder of creatures." Here we have further evidence that the Genesis creation story was intended as a theological corrective to the traditions of Israel's neighbors, traditions with which the educated Israelite, at least, was familiar.

The author respects the reader's intelligence, and does not tell us, "This is the power corresponding to the 'adam.'" But we know. And we know that God is pleased with this one, the final creation. Further, we know that God expects the man to be pleased with this one and to recognize her. With the 'adam now differentiated into male and female, human companionship is possible. Each will find in the other a power corresponding to him/her. Human solitude and isolation need be no longer. What was "not good," God now can pronounce, "very good."

A final note: 'adam in this verse refers to what was left after God had taken the material from the side of the 'adam, and what was left was now male. But the male was still 'adam, too. And the narrator had not yet given another term by which to call him. The use of 'adam here and in v. 23 to refer to the man does not contradict our contention that both man and woman are 'adam.

Genesis 2:23: Bone of My Bones, Flesh of My Flesh

Then the 'adam said,

"This time, finally, [it is] bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh!

For this reason she shall be called 'woman,'
because from 'man' this one was taken."

The man did recognize what God had done for them both. His statement is at once a poem of thanksgiving to God, and a call for every human couple to celebrate the mystery of division and reunion, the foundation and joy of human gender and sexuality.

The first two words of the man's statement are, literally, "This, the time!" It is an expression of simultaneous recognition and joy. Finally, after the disappointment of the time of naming the animals, when at the end he found no creature to be a power like and corresponding to him, here was the one! The parallel phrases, "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh," acknowledge that this one was of the same species as himself. She, too, was human. More than that, she had been taken from his own side. She was not merely of the same species; she was literally his own flesh and bone. The closest possible bond existed between this couple.

The first woman was taken out of the man; every man (and woman) since has been taken out of woman. Human beings individually, and collectively in our two respective genders, are interdependent. We were differentiated from one individual so we could relate to each other in human companionship.

A further meaning of these phrases is possible, though not certain. The formula, "X of X's," in the Semitic languages as in English, is used to indicate the superlative degree. "King of kings" means both a king over kings, and the greatest of kings. It may be that the man intended this as well: "Of all my bones and all my flesh, this is the best, because of it God made the woman." If the man meant this, too, it is another acknowledgement of God's handiwork in the creation of the woman.

Genesis 2:24: To Leave and To Cleave

For this reason, a man shall forsake his father and his mother, and he shall cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

The author's editorial comment upon this scene reinforces our understanding that the presentation of the Order of Creation in Genesis 1 and 2 is intended to teach equality between man and woman. In the patriarchal societies of ancient western Asia, a man did not leave his father and his mother; he brought his wife to live with him under his father's authority. This text confronts that practice so directly that it must be understood as intending to teach a radically different model of family life.

God did not intend women to be the servants and breeding stock of a male-dominated extended family. God did intend every woman to be the co-equal partner with her husband in the new, independent household they establish together. God did intend every man's first human loyalty and devotion to be redirected from his parents to his wife. God did intend husband and wife to rejoin as one flesh, both literally in sexual union and metaphorically in many other ways, what God had differentiated in the final creative act, the act by which God provided for human community upon the earth in reflection of divine community in heaven.

> [contents](#)

> [top of page](#)

The Order of the Fall

God had made every good provision for the man and the woman. God also had made known a single prohibition; the fruit of one tree within the garden was forbidden. The woman was the first to disobey and eat the forbidden fruit. Because of this, many have interpreted Genesis 3 to teach that man has a God-given right to dominate woman, even if Genesis 1 and 2 do not teach that as part of the Order of Creation. To establish the truth, we must take a closer look at several lines of this part of the story.

Genesis 3:6b: To Her Husband with Her

And she gave it also to her husband with her, and he ate.

A preliminary note in defense of the woman on a point in verse three is in order here. Some commentators suggest that her phrasing of the penalty for eating of the fruit was a softening of God's own words. God had said, "You shall surely die"; the woman said, "Lest you die." This so-called softening is only apparent in English, and is non-existent in Hebrew. Given the construction of the rest of the sentence, this was the natural way for the woman to report the penalty. She was not softening it. She did believe—at this point—what God had said, though she did not know what death was.

The story does say the woman conversed with the serpent, and that she ate of the forbidden fruit first.

Because of that, it has been fashionable to blame the woman. But the man did eat; he, too, was guilty of breaking faith with God.

Furthermore, the man's guilt is compounded when we consider the question often answered incorrectly, Where was the man while the serpent was tempting the woman? We often imagine him in another part of the garden, unaware of what was going on until it was too late. Then we fault the woman for not waiting at least until she had consulted him before acting so rashly.

But the text answers the question for us; the man was "with her." Apparently, the man stood by, saying nothing, offering no support, while the woman struggled with the temptation presented her by the serpent. Then, when she had eaten, he did, too, without a word of protest. The man appears passive throughout, and it is not to his credit.

Genesis 3:16b: He Shall Rule over You

To the woman He said:

".

Also, to your man shall be your desire,
But he shall rule over you."

God's statements here to the woman (and then to the man) have more the character of predictions than of judgments. Now that sin had entered the world, the order of the world had been changed. But these changes introduced by sin were not (and are not) the arbitrary judgments of God; rather, they were (and are) the inevitable consequences of choosing separation from God.

We may even see in these changes God's arrangement of things in the best way possible, now that sin had come into the world. At the least, we should not regard the new state of affairs that God outlined here as permanent and unalterable throughout eternity. God already had announced the promise of redemption through the Seed of the woman (3:15). According to Paul (Romans 8:18-25), all creation ultimately will share in this redemption, begun already in the Christian through the work of Christ.

The woman had sinned first; God showed her the consequences of her sin first. God's second pronouncement usually has been taken as God's command—or at least as God's permission—for man to dominate woman. Given God's original intention as seen in the Order of Creation, given God's ultimate intention as seen in the Order of Redemption, God's command is precisely what this cannot be. If it is God's permission, it is so only in the most remote sense, in the same way that God usually does not actively prevent any person from committing any evil. In the end, men who take selfish advantage of women will come under God's judgment.

God simply was saying to the woman, "You will desire a lover, and you will get a master. The man will take advantage of your desire and bend it to his own ends." The woman, in giving the fruit of the tree to her husband, had bent him to her desire. Now her desire constantly would be bent toward him, even when it was to her disadvantage. Her desire would be so strongly toward her husband that it would give him the leverage to rule over her.

In almost all societies of which history and anthropology have record, this has been the case. The male of nearly every society has ruled over the female, often to the point of holding her life in his hands. This is not just sexual desire. It is the natural affinity of the female for the male, often including even the nurturing

tendency of womankind. It is strong enough that often men can—and do—manipulate women unfairly by taking advantage of it in many ways, both petty and important. Some Christians have used this verse to justify the exclusion of women from significant participation in the life of the church. But the church is a society of the redeemed. The church should model the Orders of Creation and Redemption, not of the Fall. In creation, female and male are formed equally in the image of God. In Christ, the Redeemer and Lord of the church, there is neither male nor female. In the church, the body and bride of Christ, that should be the basis of polity and practice.

Genesis 3:20: Eve, the Mother of All Living

Then the man called the name of his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living.

Immediately upon the conclusion of God's encounter with the three principal characters, we are told that the man named his wife Eve. Both the name and the naming are significant. With the naming, God's prediction began already to be carried out. Her husband would rule over her, God had said. His naming her was an act of dominion, just as the 'adam's naming of the animals had been an act of dominion.

The name, Eve (Hebrew, *Havah*), is derived from a verb meaning "to live." (Scholars are divided over whether it is from the most common Hebrew verb, "to live.") The statement explaining the meaning of her name is the author's, not Adam's, since she had not yet borne any children when Adam named her. Adam named her Eve in anticipation of her motherhood, for God had promised her children. All future human life would be traced back to its beginning within the womb of Eve.

Further, in assigning this name to the woman and arrogating to himself the name "Adam," the man was saying, in effect, "I am 'human being,' but you are not quite 'human being.' You are only the mother of human beings." Domination of other human beings is possible only as, and insofar as, we dehumanize them, a process that began in human relationships even before the first couple had left the Garden.

> [contents](#)

> [top of page](#)

The Order of Redemption

Beyond Genesis 3, the Old Testament record of the dealings of man with woman and woman with man is mainly of two kinds. A considerable body of narrative details men's abominable treatment of women. But an even greater number and variety of passages show God's redemptive purposes already at work before Calvary.

In the Hebrew Bible: A Call to a Better Way

One sign of hope often missed in societies shaped by life in the shadow of the Cross is the legislation of the Torah, God's instruction to Israel at Sinai. Much of that legislation seems to us to be anti-woman, and if implemented today, of course would be. But in its own day, it was God's mitigation of the worst features of a patriarchal, slave-holding society that found itself often, for many reasons, on the edge between security and disaster. The spirit of Israel's law toward women was superior to much in antiquity, and its spirit encouraged both men and women to grow in grace toward God and toward each other.

Secondly, there are passages of genuinely lyrical quality extolling the virtues, the rightness, and the pleasure of the genders relating to each other as God intended. Some of these are narratives, as Jacob's love for Rachel (Genesis 29). Some are poetic compositions in praise of women, as when wisdom is personified as a woman (e.g., Proverbs 8:1—9:6), and when the "excellent wife" is lauded (Proverbs 31:10-31).

Perhaps the best is the Song of Songs, with its delight in the sensual love of a woman and a man. In this love-song drama, there is no hint of female subordination to the male.

The Hebrew Scriptures show women in leadership positions. Miriam was a leader, with her brothers Moses and Aaron, in Israel's Exodus from Egypt. Miriam and other women occupied the office of prophet, a position ordained by God. Deborah was one of the judges of early Israel, when the office of judge was the highest in the nation. In the period of the monarchy, the Queen Mother (the mother of the reigning king) was, in both Israel and Judah, an important person of great political influence. The "excellent woman" of Proverbs 31 is presented as a woman to be emulated; such women lived in Israel, independent businesswomen of industry, acumen, wealth, and influence.

One of the most lyrical and powerful examples of the Hebrew Scriptures' assumption that women as well as men are called and gifted for ministry in the Kingdom of God occurs in a comparison of Isaiah 40:9 with Isaiah 52:7, an example all the more powerful because it is done in passing, taken for granted, not especially pointed out. Both these verses honor the person who brings good tidings to Jerusalem. In Isaiah 40:9, the messenger of good tidings is designated by use of a feminine participle and all five verbs in the

verse are feminine. In Isaiah 52:7, the same participle is used, except that here it is masculine in form. Both feminine and masculine forms are used of those who perform one of the most joyous and joy-inspiring tasks in all Scripture, bringing glad tidings of peace to the city and the people of God.

The Hebrew Bible: Canonical Placement

Another fact that, when recognized, trumpets the Old Testament's call for equality between the genders is "hidden" so prominently that it almost always is missed. I refer to the canonical placement of the several most important texts about women. Genesis 1-3 is first in the canon of all the Scripture. This is not by accident. What it teaches is foundational; it requires our attention and our assent to its teachings. Since it includes teaching about man, woman, and their relationship, what it teaches on these subjects must be normative for the believer.

A second prominently hidden teaching by virtue of canonical placement occurs in the arrangement of the third major division of the Hebrew Bible, the Writings. In the book of Proverbs, four female characters figure prominently. Early in the book, wisdom and folly are personified as women. Wisdom is to be sought above any treasure; folly is to be avoided (woman, as well as man, is fallen, and needs God's redemption). In the last chapter of Proverbs, King Lemuel records the wisdom his mother taught him (Proverbs 31:1-9). This is followed by the last pericope of the book, the famous acrostic poem extolling the "excellent woman," the gifted woman of strength, initiative and standing.

Immediately following Proverbs (Hebrew Bible arrangement) is the book of Ruth. Boaz, at the threshing floor, told Ruth she was an "excellent woman" (Ruth 3:11); the Hebrew is identical with Proverbs 31:10. Boaz promised he would marry Ruth, as she had asked. Ruth was not Israelite, but Moabite; this fact heightens further the emphasis on the teaching that women are not to be denied equality in the community of faith; even "foreign" women who join the family of Yahweh are "excellent women."

Having noted this tie between the last chapter of Proverbs and the book of Ruth, we should consider also the next four books in the Hebrew canonical arrangement, because together Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Esther make up the group called the Megillot, or (Festival) Scrolls. If Proverbs 31, extolling the excellent woman, serves as an introduction to the story of Ruth the excellent woman, might it perhaps serve as an introduction to the rest of the Megillot, as well? When we ask this question in this context, we note immediately that all five of these special books—each read on an important occasion of the Jewish liturgical year—have feminine subjects.

Ruth is the central character of Ruth; the Shulammitte, of the Song of Songs. The feminine participle *Qohelet* designates the protagonist of Ecclesiastes (though the book begins with the implication that this is King Solomon). The ravished and ravaged daughter of Zion is alternately the speaker and the subject of Lamentations. Esther took the initiative early in her story, and guided events to a successful conclusion for her people.

If Proverbs, the distillation of Israelite wisdom, features women prominently, and for the most part positively; if Proverbs has obvious links with Ruth; if the liturgical books of five major observances of the religious year all focus on women (real or personified); is not the proper conclusion that the inspired Wisdom of Israel regarded women very highly indeed?!

The Old Testament does not attempt to gloss over the bitter price of sin paid by women who live in a society dominated by sinful men. But in its legislation it goes as far as possible, for that age, to curb men's cruelty to women. And from beginning to end it goes further in its moral and relational instruction, teaching that God intended better, that both men and women benefit from following God's better way.

The New Testament: The Order of Redemption Begun in Christ

This section can be but a short, quick overview. In any case, others have covered this ground much more thoroughly and more capably than I can do.⁶

The Gospels

First, the New Testament also presents us with an important fact of canonical arrangement. The first New Testament pericope, Matthew 1:1-17, is a genealogy of Jesus, arranged in three groups of fourteen male ancestors, for a total of forty-two. In the first group, representing the formative years of the Israelite community of faith, four women are listed, also. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba all were non-Israelite. (Bathsheba may have been Israelite, but her name is Canaanite, and her husband was Uriah "the Hittite.") Three of the four were "immoral" women; the fourth, Ruth, was from Moab, the nation remembered for luring Israel into immorality at Baal-Peor (Numbers 25).

Yet Matthew listed Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. He did not list Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel, the honored wives of Israel's first patriarchs, the physical and spiritual founders of the nation. Why the former group and not the latter?

Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba came from outside Israel; their inclusion in the genealogy of Israel's Messiah is an emphatic reminder that God's grace is not for Israel alone. God intended Israel to be a conduit and a messenger of God's grace, not merely a recipient. To include "foreign" women in Jesus' genealogy was to emphasize the elevated status of all women, and the fact of God's grace extended to all persons, female and male.

Also, each of these women exercised decisive initiative to come to the place where she could benefit from the outpouring of God's grace. Facing both active and passive opposition, these women acted in faith, acted on their own initiative to join the community of faith. Each became, in the manner available to her, a leader in the community of faith of her own time. Matthew recognized their decisions and their actions as commendable and, in the very first pericope of the New Testament, commended them.

Throughout the Gospels we see—if we are looking—the radically new and different treatment of women by Jesus. He talked with women, ate with, traveled with, and taught women, accepted women's ministry to him with respect and dignity. Luke especially recorded Jesus' attitude and actions toward women, calling men to a better way in this realm of their lives, too.

Given the social norms of Roman Palestine, it is impossible to overestimate the importance of the fact that women were the first to see Jesus' empty tomb, and to see Jesus himself after His resurrection, and further, that Jesus directed the women to report His resurrection to Peter and the rest of the men of the company. Women, whose witness was not accepted in a court of law, were charged with first witness to the most important event in all history. This was church leadership of the first order!

The Early Years of the Church

In the life of the early church, as recorded both in the book of Acts and in many of the epistles, we would have to be blind not to notice that many women were active in leadership.

Lydia and a group of women in Philippi were the first converts and became the first local church on the soil of Europe (Acts 16:13-15). Priscilla and her husband Aquila were associates of Paul, and taught Apollos (Acts 18:2; 24-26). Paul encouraged and exhorted Euodia and Syntyche as fellow workers in the cause of the gospel (Philippians 4:2-3).

In Paul's long list of greetings to individuals in the church at Rome, the first two names are of women; ten of those referred to individually were women (Romans 16:1-16). One of these, Junia, Paul included in the ranks of the apostles, the highest office of the First Century church, though this fact is obscured in many translations by rendering her name as masculine, Junias (Romans 16:7). Paul took it for granted that women would pray and prophesy in church; to pray and to prophesy were to exercise leadership and teaching roles in the public worship of the church (I Corinthians 11:5).

The programmatic New Testament text on this issue is also from Paul, Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." This is not an eschatological idealism of Paul; it is his mission statement for the church in its interpersonal relationships, whether on an individual (one-on-one) or on a communal (group) level.

The Few "Problem" Texts

The evidence of both the Old and the New Testaments is overwhelming that God instituted gender equality in the Order of Creation, that male domination of woman is directly and solely the result of sin (the Order of the Fall), and that God intended and intends the Order of Redemption to restore gender equality, beginning with the community of faith, the church. The few New Testament "problem" texts we must interpret in this light. We cannot deal with them in depth here, but simply state the most prominent "problems," and list their most probable "solutions."

I Corinthians 11:3ff.

"The man is [the] head of woman."

By now every competent intermediate Greek student knows that "head" in Greek does not connote "authority," "ruler," or "boss," as it often does in modern English. Greek *kephale* (KEH-fah-lay), used as a metaphor, means "source," "origin." Paul was reminding the Corinthian church of the chronological sequence of the events of creation. That which God took from the single 'adam, God built into the first woman. This means that the individual who became "man" was the chronological and physical source of the individual who became "woman." When we consider this entire passage, it is clear that "head" cannot refer to hierarchical authority, or we create serious Christological heresy with our interpretation.⁷

I Corinthians 14:34-35.

"Let the women keep silent in the churches."

If this is the instruction of Paul himself, it is culture-specific, even church-specific. Some of the uneducated women (the majority of women were not afforded the opportunity to learn), sitting in a separate section of

the congregation from their husbands, had become accustomed to calling questions across the room to their husbands when they heard statements they did not understand. Paul simply was telling them not to do that; it disrupted worship for the entire congregation. Such women should save their questions and ask them at home.

Others have made quite a strong case that these are not Paul's own words; he was quoting legalistic, misogynistic opponents in order to refute them. Since writing conventions of the First Century did not always require one to indicate when one was quoting, these statements, over time, came mistakenly to be regarded as Paul's own. The error was compounded by reading them then as a universal prohibition against women speaking in church.

Ephesians 5:22,

"The women to their own husbands."

Paul's sentence begins several verses earlier. "Being subject" does not occur in verse 22, but is inferred (and supplied by many translations) from verse 21. In verse 21 "being subject" is not a main verb of the sentence; it is a participle used with a reciprocal pronoun. Together, they should be rendered, "being subject to one another."

If used as an example of how every person in the body of Christ should be subject to every other person—that is, should have a willing spirit to do whatever one can do to serve another in any given circumstance—there is no particular problem with Ephesians 5:22. Wives to their husbands, as all of us to each other, should exemplify the spirit of Christ.

However, when used by husbands or teachers in the church to impose conditions of second-class citizenship upon wives, this verse is terribly misinterpreted and misused to bring into the church a non-Christian, anti-Christian model of leadership and followership, one that Jesus himself specifically condemned (Mark 10:42-45; John 13:12-17).

I Timothy 2:12,

"But I do not allow a woman to teach, nor to exercise authority over a man, but to be in silence."

This is a rendering according to the traditional understanding of this verse. But Catherine Kroeger⁸ has made a strong case that it should be rendered something like, "I do not permit a woman to teach that she is the originator of man, but she is to be in conformity [with the Scriptures] [or: she is to be in silence]" (my translation, based on Kroeger).

Some women who had come into the church at Ephesus, where Timothy was overseer (bishop), had begun to teach a distorted version of the Genesis creation story, based partly on gnostic doctrine, and partly on earth goddess theology, which was then very popular in Asia Minor. (The temple of Artemis/Diana in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.) Part of this heretical teaching was that Eve was the real first person of the human race; together with the serpent, Eve was regarded as creatress of humanity.

Based on Paul's work with women throughout his ministry, his written commendations of women co-workers, and everything else we know about Paul's thinking on this matter, it is inconceivable that he would issue a blanket prohibition against women filling the office of teacher/preacher anytime, anywhere, if men were present. In this verse, Paul was simply forbidding the teaching of this particular heretical doctrine in the Christian church, a heresy that, because of the popularity of the goddess religion in Asia Minor at that time, was being taught principally by women.

> [contents](#)

> [top of page](#)

Conclusion

The New Testament makes it abundantly clear that one of the characteristics of the Order of Redemption is a restoration of the equality between male and female. The question for the church becomes then, Are we going to perpetuate an order of female/male relationships that has its roots directly in the Fall, that is a direct and immediate consequence of sin, or are we going to live in the Order of Redemption, that clearly and intentionally calls us to equality in every area of life? To put it as bluntly as possible: When is the church going to give up the sin of treating women unequally, shown most frequently and most destructively by denying women co-leadership in their homes with their husbands and by denying women leadership positions in the church, the body of Christ, who died to redeem us from all the consequences of our sin? The negative influences of inaccurate biblical interpretation on this issue have made deep inroads into our movement. Many of our people have been led astray; thus, it is imperative that Wesleyan/Holiness clergy, women and men, know the solid biblical basis for our historical teachings on this issue.

If the church is to be true to our calling in Christ, we must teach and practice the biblical equality of men and women, in our homes, in our churches, in every area of our lives. All of us—women, men, and especially our children—have nothing to lose but the sin that shackles and trips us. We have everything to gain in genuine, godly, reciprocal love and service, to God and to all our sisters and brothers, as we help each other toward that heavenly home where God waits to welcome us with open arms and the words of commendation to all women and all men who have served God unstintingly, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant! Enter into the joy of thy Lord!"

> [contents](#)

> [top of page](#)

Notes

1. I wish to thank Laura Moore for her invaluable suggestions at several points as this work was in process.
2. All biblical translations in this work are my own.
3. C. S. Lewis, in his sermon, "The Weight of Glory," readily available in anthologies of Lewis's work.
4. I first learned of this meaning of *'ezer* in Walter Kaiser, Hard Sayings of the Old Testament, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), pp. 23-26.
5. Phyllis Trible, God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 80.
6. Several topics in this section are covered in more detail by Gilbert Bilezikian, Beyond Sex Roles, 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985).
7. Bilezikian (see n. 6) is especially helpful on this passage; Beyond Sex Roles, pp. 134-144, and "Appendix," pp. 215-252.
8. Richard Clark Kroeger and Catherine Clark Kroeger. I Suffer not a Woman: Rethinking I Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992). This is a multi-faceted issue. To follow Kroeger's argument, one should read the entire volume; that is a very enjoyable task. (Catherine Kroeger generously credits her husband with co-authorship, but this work is hers.)

> [contents](#)

> [top of page](#)